

ENGLISH RP (“Received Pronunciation”)

English RP, “received pronunciation,” sometimes called “English Standard Speech,” is a speech pattern defined along both geographical and social lines. A commonly shared speech pattern of Southeastern England, including the areas of London, Oxford, and Cambridge, it was just starting to coalesce as a particular accent pattern during the late 17th century, and reached the point of becoming a specifically favored accent for educated persons and persons of the upper class during the eighteenth century.

POSTURE or FOCUS: The jaw is raised higher (more closed) than in American speech, with the teeth just slightly apart. All the muscles used in articulation, especially the lips, cheeks, and tongue, are tensed slightly. There should be minimal space between the palate and the tongue, all the way along the oral cavity. The tip of the tongue should have very easy access to the alveolar ridge (the gum ridge inside the upper teeth); therefore the tongue must not be retracted at all. Articulation—within these constraints—is very active however, especially at the lips and the tip of the tongue. There is a very slight “channeling” of the tongue, with the side edges of the tongue held higher than the midline.

INTONATION PATTERN: There is much less reliance on stressing syllables to emphasize them in English RP than in American English. There is much more reliance on pitch variation and elongation of vowel or diphthong sounds. This pitch variation, or tune, tends to take place sharply and within individual syllables rather than slowly throughout a phrase. Unlike American pitch patterns, which frequently start low, build quickly upward, and then slowly sink downward through the rest of the sentence, an RP sentence often begins high, swoops downward on the first syllable, varies considerably throughout with intervals between patterns, and then ends high. Since this is the exact opposite of the American phrase pattern, it is important for Americans to practice this characteristic intonation for RP, even though one would not use it in every sentence.

STRESS: Use what Gillian Lane-Plescia calls the “rattle-rattle-BING” pattern of stress in a phrase. RP stresses far less words than we do in American English, but when an important word is stressed, it is stressed more, frequently with a slight elongation of the vowel sound as well as the pitch variation noted above. So there is a much greater emphasis contrast between stressed and unstressed words in RP than in most American accents.

KEY FOCUS SOUND: [oʊ] changes to [əʊ]

Notice that one needs to keep the jaw raised and the tongue tense to do this sound easily and fluently, so that the diphthong slides back from the middle of the mouth rather than starting in the mid-back, as in American. Once you have found the jaw and tongue

posture that necessitates this important characteristic action in RP, the other sounds of the accent will follow as an inevitable result. The [əʊ] diphthong is an important marker for differentiating modern RP from its tense upper-class hyperlect [eʊ] and the older form of RP that flourished until the mid-1920s, which featured more lip corner advancement [oʊ].

(Practice the word list and sentences with each of these alternative pronunciations: [əʊ], [eʊ], and [oʊ].

Tone, gold, owe, note, below, sew, shoulder, rove, plosive, droves, approach, soaked.

So the host showed the dough to his grossly bloated crony.

“Oh, a no-show.” the Oklahoma notary moaned, throwing his phone overboard.

CHARACTERISTIC SOUNDS:

VOWELS:

Most vowel sounds in English RP are actually spoken with the same articulator posture as in much American speech. The only real difference—but an important one—that pervades all these vowels in RP is that the jaw is raised, the tongue is never retracted, and all the articulators hold more tension; that is, the muscles of articulation are braced slightly. For most vowels this produces a characteristic flavor to the sounds, but it is in only a few cases that an actual adjustment of vowel posture is required. Here are the most important ones.

[ɜ:] This vowel is spoken as placed on the official IPA chart, in a slightly lowered (open) unrounded mid-center position.. The tongue is tense, and held in a very slightly cupped posture. There is no “R-color” when the vowel is followed by a spelled “r” in the same syllable, as in “terse.” The distinction between the [ɜ:] and an [ɪ] at the start of the next syllable is very strict, as in “hurry.” In the American version, the tongue is slightly arched, is less tense, and very often ends with some “R-color.”

surf, learn, bird, purse, shirk, mercantile, assertive, German, clergy
courage, furrow, flurry, burrow, nourish, currency, Durham, turret.

Myrtle’s learning curve on the work was perfect.

The burly German cursed, “This first wurst is the worst.”

His brow furrowed with worry, Mr. Murray hurried away from Surrey.

The curry was nourishing.

The vowel [ʌ] is pronounced as it is placed on the official IPA chart: as a slightly lowered (open) unrounded back vowel. The tongue is tense and the back is very slightly cupped. To American ears this gives the vowel, in RP, a slight [ɑ] sound, in comparison to the American version which is advanced toward a mid-center vowel placement and less tense.

[ɑ] to [ɒ], and [ɔ] to [ɒ] on “short O” words like “hot,” “not,” “sob,” “job,” “sorry,” “honest,” etc. and also “cost,” “lost,” etc.

cot, stop, shock, blond, borrow, porridge, coffee, horrid, torrent, lorry, Boris.

They stopped in the forest, lost.

Hobbled by his colostomy, but obstinate, the foppish Boston mobster lobbed his costly crock pot at the cop.

CONSONANTS:

[ɜ̃] to [ɜ], [ɪ̃] to [ɪ], [ẽ] to [e], [ʊ̃] to [ʊ], [ɔ̃] to [ɔ], [ɑ̃] to [ɑ] or [ɑ:]. All “R-color,” where one might sound some “R” after vowels in American syllables, is eliminated.

Peer, stare, star, lure, pure, dire, core, burr, par, ne'er, dear, hour, fire, poor, wore, bard, seared, port, charm, toured, lurk, fork, paired, shares, course

Near the shore, the poor pair, tired from the tour, were barely heard.

Lord Coors, the retired peer, cared for and adored his weird ward Cher.

“Any port in a storm!” he warned, partially hoarse from cursing.

[ɹ] as a consonant is pronounced as a sharp, clearly defined action with the tip (and sometimes the very front of the blade) of the tongue moving toward the roof of the mouth just back of the gum ridge (alveolar ridge) behind the upper teeth. Start with a drawn-out [z], pull the tongue tip slightly back until it stops sounding like a good [z], and then lower the tongue tip very slightly away from the post-alveolar position. Note that the side edges of the tongue are firmly braced on the inside upper bicuspid and molars.

Final [ɹ] may be fully sounded as a “linking R” when the next word in connected speech begins with a vowel.

Right, arose, direct, correct, role, dirision, Ruritania, rack, reach, rout, rural, turret.

Round the rough and rugged rock the ragged rascal ran.

Rhyming “wrests” with “wrists” runs riot with rigid rules.

Ferrara’s perorations for all bereft or errant barristers are arrayed around a reference to one cherished paramour or another.

Make sure that all [t] sounds, especially in final positions and at the start of unstressed syllables, remain unvoiced. Americans tend to semi-voice them toward [d]. In contemporary RP, there is often a stopped glottal [ʔ] substitution for a final [t].

Pretty, dirty, satellite, atavism, attitude, watery, certain, chattel, British, forty,

Thirty party-goers tittered subtly at the totally batty patter from Pat.

The roto-rooter routed out the rat.

Betty Botter bought some butter.

There is no distinction between [w] as in “wine,” and [ʍ] as in “whine,” in RP. They are all voiced [w].

awhile, whether, whinny, whit, whets, whale, whack, whimper, whisk

Why not whip Winnie’s whinnying horse while we wait?

“When do we get to wet our whiskers with whisky?” Walter whined wistfully.

[u] to [ju] when the vowel in a word is spelled with “u,” “ew,” or occasionally with “ui.” This is called the “liquid U” and occurs consistently in RP. (In American speech the glide from the [j] only happens in some words in this category but not in all.) These that “duke” is pronounced “dyook,” not “dook.” This only happens never when the spelling is “oo,” “ou,” or “o.” A subtlety: The “y” sound (phonetically [j]) is pronounced further forward onto a tensed tongue blade than the more relaxed [j] that Americans use when we pronounce a “liquid U.”

Futile, stupid, duty, queue, due, tube, news, Tewksbury, enumerate.

Two dubious nudists queued to view the lewd gew-gaws.

I assume you’re impugning that stupid tune “Duelling Tubas.”

[ʒ] to [z̥] or [s̥] especially in a medial position in a word. Also sometimes [ʃ] to [s̥]. Because the jaw is raised and the tongue is tense, these alveolar-palatal fricatives (in American) move to laminal post-alveolar placements in RP. This is much more true in

an upper-class hyperlect or in RP spoken by older speakers. Sometimes, as in a word like “presume,” the process will reverse and a [z] will have a laminal action [ʒ].

azure, tissue, Persia, Asia, dirision, seizure, measure, casual

An explosion issued from the tissue.

The unusual occasion in Malaysia brought closure.

WORD PRONUNCIATIONS:

The old saying is that Britain and America are two countries separated by a common language. Of course we can understand each other quite well, for the most part, but there are a number of differences. The English and the Americans use different words for the same thing: the boot of a car in England is the trunk of the car in America. They also use the same word to mean different things: Americans are embarrassed sometimes at entering a clothing shop, asking to purchase some pants, and being directed to the underwear department. And never mind the hilarity in English movie houses a few years ago when the trailer for “Free Willy” was being shown.

But the English and Americans also pronounce quite differently many of the same words with the same meaning. Most of these pronunciation differences are quite individual; the only way to learn them is to listen to RP speakers a lot, something that is very easy to do, given the availability of the BBC World Service audio on the internet and all the videotapes and DVDs available today. There are some pronunciations that do fit into categories: for example, Americans tend to pronounce—and stress—French loan-words in English as though we are saying French with a very American accent. The English go further, much further. Whether this is due to the long enmity between the English and the French during the years when modern English was developing, or to some purely linguistic cause, I do not know. But the English always change the stress on French loan-words from the ultimate (i.e. last) syllable to the penultimate (second-to-last) syllable, as in ballet, valet, garage, and brochure.

THE MOST IMPORTANT PRONUNCIATION DIFFERENCE:

[æ] to [ɑ] on many—but not all—words where the vowel is followed in the same syllable by [f], [s], [sp], [st], [sk], [θ], [ð], [nt], [nd], [mpl]. *Note that this list shows the sounds phonetically; they may be spelled differently.* In contemporary RP the [ɑ] has moved forward in the mouth toward [a], the “intermediate A.”

There are a number of exceptions to any rules one might set for this sound change. Ultimately, the only way to learn them is to listen to RP accents and note the words where the change takes place.

pass, plaster, chance, command, gasp, answer, blast, class, example, advance, half, draught, chaff, rather, flask, banana, photograph

He gave half a glance at the disastrous command from France.

She shan't plant the branch near the path through the pasture.

They sampled the last water from the ghastly brass flask in the Sahara.

Compare:	[æ]	[ɑ] or [a]
	Mass	pass
	Lass	grass
	Plastic	plaster
	Grand	command
	Hand	demand
	Pant	enchant

Unique pronunciations and pronunciations differing from American (a very partial list):

Prinknash	[ˈpɪŋk.nɪdʒ]	clerk	[kɫɑ:k]
Culzean	[kʊləɪn]	figure	[ˈfɪ.gə]
Caius	[ˈkʰi:z]	herb	[hɜ:b]
Magdalen	[ˈmɒd.lɪn]	lieutenant	[lef.tən.ənt] (army)
Belvoir	[ˈbi.və]	“	[lu.tən.ənt] (navy)
Wemyss	[wɪmz]	missile	[ˈmɪ.səl]
Dalziel	[di.ɛʃ]	privacy	[ˈpɪ.və.sɪ]
Wrotham	[ˈrʊtəm]	schedule	[ˈʃe.djuːl]
Lympne	[lɪm]	vitamin	[ˈvɪ.tə.mɪn]
Derby	[ˈdɔ:bi]	urinal	[ˌjʊəˈrɪəl]
Hertford	[ˈhɑ:fəd]	controversy	[kənˈtrɒvəsi]
Berkshire	[ˈbɜ:kʃə]	garage	[ˈgæ.rɑ:ʒ] or [ˈgæ.rɪdʒ]
Thames	[ˈtʰemz]	Beaulieu	[ˈbju:li]
Pall Mall	[pæl məl] or [peɪ məl]	ballet	[ˈbæ.leɪ]
Beauchamp	[ˈbi:tʃəm]	brochure	[ˈbrɔʊʃə]
Warwick	[ˈwɔ:ɪk]	valet	[ˈvæ.lɪt] or [ˈvæ.leɪ]
Cheswick	[ˈtʃɪ.zɪk]	comrade	[ˈkɒm.rɛɪd]
Norwich	[ˈnɔ:ɪtʃ]	café	[kæf]
Gloucester	[ˈglɒs.tə]	Maurice	[ˈmɔ:ɪs]
Leicester	[ˈle.stə]	corollary	[kəˈrɒ.lə.rɪ]
Marlborough	[ˈmɔ:l.brə]	Cokes	[kʊks]

Mainwaring	[mæ.nə.ɪŋ]	Home	[çu:m]
Ruthven	[ɪ.vŋ]	ate	[et]
Leveson-Gower	[ˈlu.sŋ.gɔʊ]	My (unstressed)	[mɪ]
Menzies	[ˈmɪz.ɪs]	Featherstonehaugh	[ˈfæɪn.ʃɔ:]
Cholmondeley	[ˈtʃɒm.lɪ]	yogurt	[ˈjɒg.ət]
St. John	[ˈsɪn.dʒən]	debris	[ˈdeɪb.rɪs]
glacier	[ˈglæ.s.jə]	premature	[ˌpreɪmətʃʊə]

“Been” and “Again.” When stressed, these words may still be spoken, especially by older speakers, as [bi:n] and [əgeɪn]. However these pronunciations are modifying toward [bɪn] and [əgeɪn]. “Been” is always—and has always been—spoken as [bɪn] when unstressed in a sentence.

*It's not where you're going, but where you've been, that's important.
The payoff from the bookie gave him a gain a game again.*

“Either” and “neither” are still commonly pronounced [aɪðə] and [naɪðə] in RP, but [i:ðə] and [ni:ðə] are becoming more acceptable alternatives.